DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 482 399 CS 512 529

AUTHOR	Smith, Carl B., Ed.
TITLE	Current Trends in Information Literacy. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	TBC-030028
PUB DATE	2003-12-00
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: http://reading.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Curriculum Development; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Information Literacy; Internet; Literature Reviews; Technological Advancement; Technological Literacy; Thinking Skills

ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary reviews research to examine the current trends in information literacy. It notes that the most recent studies of information literacy reflect the following concerns: (1) the effects of new information technologies (especially the Internet) on traditional methods of research and instruction in research; (2) the ways in which these new technologies are shaping current notions of literacy; and (3) the absence or virtual absence in most primary and secondary education curricula of classes suited to these new problems. The topical bibliography and commentary concludes that all authors reviewed share a common interest in providing teachers and scholars in the field of education with definitions of "literacy," which are suited to the technological environment of the early 21st century, and with suggesting means of adapting their methods of instruction to this relatively new and confusing environment. Contains 9 references and annotated links to 2 Internet resources. (RS)

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Current Trends in Information Literacy

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ED 482 399

Introduction

The most recent studies of "information literacy" reflect the following concerns: 1) the effects of new information technologies (especially the internet) on traditional methods of research and instruction in research; 2) the ways in which these new technologies are shaping current notions of literacy; 3) the absence or virtual absence in most primary and secondary education curricula of classes suited to these new problems.

Effects of New Information Technologies

Bertram Bruce's *New Literacies* (1998) discusses the development of human sign systems into the "information age." He stresses the fact that the transmission of information has always involved some form of technology, and asserts that it is improper, when thinking about information, not to think about the technology which delivers that information and its effect upon the way in which that information is received. Contemporary information technologies (digital/multimedia/hypertext literacy and virtual reality) are, he claims, changing our definitions of what it means to be "literate," since exchanges of information are now beginning to occur in environments which are not strictly *textual*.

Current Notions of Literacy

Many of Bruce's claims and arguments are recapitulated in Alice Yucht's brief essay of 2000, and in an earlier article by Cathleen Rafferty (1999). Rafferty, however, introduces some useful new terms to describe contemporary Literacies. "Text-based" literacy is being superseded by what she calls "representational literacy," a more nebulous set of skills involving the ability to discern the motives and hidden meanings of a given item of information. "Representational literacy" is another term for "critical thinking." Students are (or should be), according to Rafferty, encouraged to ask the following questions about media messages, even those which seem authoritative:

1. Who created this message, and why?
2. What techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented?
4. How might different people understand this message differently?
5. What is omitted from this message? (Rafferty 1999)

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Information Literacy in the Classroom Curricula

While new information technologies such as the internet have democratized information, making it available to more people more inexpensively and faster than ever before,

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information has also become something of an unstable property in the classroom, creating additional problems for teachers and students. The lack of critical thinking skills in students was documented in the research, and critical thinking skills have started to be emphasized in the middle and high school as well as in the university levels (Lorenzen, 2002; Martorana, Curtis, DeDecker, Edgerton, Gibbens, & Lueck, 2002; Ryan & Capra, 2001). Some strategies to deal with the tendency of students to receive information (particularly information taken from the internet) uncritically are mentioned in an article by Steve J. Herro (2000). Like most of the authors mentioned above, Herro asserts that, on all levels of the education system, instruction in how to use library resources should be more than an overview of how information is obtained in the libraries—it must also foster students' critical awareness of the media they will be using for their research. Internet research or "electronic information" as he calls it has made the task of teaching critical awareness more important than ever, given the tendency of high-school and college students to treat all information obtained over the internet as necessarily valid, along with their fondness for internet research because of its relative simplicity and its ability to produce quick results. He quotes an earlier observation by Doyle and Martorana (1996), a complaint made roughly at the beginning of the spread of internet research technology:

For most of our clientele, anything electronic is preferable to print. Students are drawn to computer databases whether or not relevant print tools exist...Many students are deceived by the illusion that computer searching is magic—all that is required is to type in some words, hit enter, and if the results are at all relevant, gratefully accept them. Neither the source, the search, nor the results are questioned.

University professors have begun to adapt their classrooms to these circumstances, and are developing ways to encourage a critical awareness of internet sources while also making sure that students do not neglect the more traditional sources of research information, journals and monographs. Herro briefly describes a course taught at the University of Arizona at Tucson in which students, after being divided into topic groups, must prepare a presentation on as many web sites, journal articles and monographs as are relevant to their chosen problem. The questions they are required to ask resemble those mentioned earlier by Rafferty (1999):

a) What is the author's thesis? Is the author successful in arguing the thesis, and what conclusions can the reader draw?
b) Who is the audience (specialized professional, general public, academic)? The source reviews are reported to the list server, which allows all class members easy access to the information.

Similar experiments have taken place recently at other universities: all require that students either individually or in a group prepare annotated bibliographies of the sources relevant to their classes.

Other articles concerned with broad revisions of school curricula are those by Yucht (1999), Moore (2000) and Erickson (1998). The first two are largely arguments for introducing an "information skills" curriculum into the elementary and middle school classroom. Moore points to recent studies which demonstrate that the majority of teachers in elementary and middle school classrooms are not at all sure what "information literacy" is: in one school, 64% of teachers said that information skills are the same as research skills. A consequence of this situation is that students tend to have difficulty not so much with accessing "information" as

with assessing its validity and worth for their own projects. Moore's study is concerned with the problems of very young children (8 to 9 years old) and is largely an examination of what students' responses to information-gathering activities can tell us about their cognitive processes.

Yucht's brief article is devoted to describing what proponents of an informational literacy curriculum are up against—in short, the tendency of school administrators to habitually commit the error described by Bertram, and ignore the importance of the means of information-gathering:

> [W]hen the New Jersey Department of Education published their first draft of the new Core Content Curriculum Standards, school librarians around the state were shocked to discover that libraries weren't even mentioned in the educational directive! Although there were statements like "students will gather information in order to..." the issue of where and how they'd find that information was not addressed.

One article whose concerns are fairly unique when compared with the others reviewed in this summary is Erickson 1998. Unlike the other authors mentioned above, Erickson advocates instruction in "information literacy" as a means of preparing students for problems they will face "not only in school but also in work and social situations where information is a form of currency". Erickson is critical of the tendency in American elementary education to emphasize what he calls "the classical literacy curriculum," especially the teaching of fiction and poetry, whose only advantage is in Erickson's view that it "prepares students to be successful in future school experiences; novels, plays, and poetry for the next level of education". The problems of the "classical" curriculum appear in the phenomenon known as the "fourth grade slump." Erickson hypothesizes that this occurs because of the fact that

> [i]n content area lessons, (students) encounter multiple sources and informational material—in, for example, science and social studies texts—that are presented as an array of related concepts organized by time frames or cause-and-effect structures. Often students raised on a steady diet of setting, characters, plots, episodes, and outcomes encounter a phenomenon called the "fourth-grade slump," where reading comprehension problems arise from unfamiliar text structures.

Erickson advocates less of an emphasis on fictional texts in favor of non-fictional narratives, and class activities which integrate the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening with a content that has more to do with science or with social problems than with imaginative literature.

Conclusion

Erickson's hostility toward imaginative literature and the humanities in general is presumably not shared by the other authors whose arguments are reviewed in this summary. His emphasis on informational literacy instruction as a means of preparing students for "real-world" problems is also peculiar when compared with other authors in the field. Most of the authors reviewed in this text are concerned simply with fostering critical thinking skills at an early age, skills which are useful to the student both as a student and as a member of his or her community. Herro is explicitly concerned with the relevance of questions posed by studies in

information literacy for teachers in the humanities as well as those fields such as business. All authors reviewed in this text share a common interest in providing teachers and scholars in the field of education with definitions of "literacy" which are suited to the technological environment of the early twenty-first century, and with suggesting means of adapting their methods of instruction to this relatively new and confusing environment.

Internet Resources

* The Information Literacy Movement of the School Library Media Field: A Preliminary Summary of the Research
This article provides an overview of the history of the information literacy movement, discusses its practice in school libraries since the late 1980s, and provides information on six popular models of information literacy. It was written by David V. Loertscher and Blanche Woolls from the San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science.
http://witloof.sjsu.edu/courses/250.loertscher/modelloer.html

* Information Power: Building Parternships for Learning
This AASL/AECT publication includes the Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning that will help students become skillful producers and consumers of information along with the guidelines and principles that will help librarians create a dynamic, student-centered program.
http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/AASL/Professional_Tools10/Information_Power/Information_Power.htm

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ERIC TBC #030027 was published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Tel. 1-800-759-4723. Full text at: http://eric.indiana.edu. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary summaries are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. This project is funded at least in part with Federal funds from the US Department of Education under contract ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Government.

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